Causes of Resistance to Change. What Managers Should Do?

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Change is considered, in more and more cases, an inevitable process and the development of an organization largely depends on how it reacts and adapts to transformations occurring. Change has both positive and negative aspects, it implies experiment and creation of something new and different, but it also means destruction of familiar facts and relationships. The implementation failure rate of organizational change remains high and one of the most common causes of this is considered to be the resistance to change. Although the resistance to change is considered a natural reaction, it is necessary to understand the causes and identify the measures for its reduction. Using content analysis of representative works, as a research method, we identified a number of factors that cause resistance to change and methods than can be used to decrease it, in order to successful implement the organizational change.

Keywords: organizational change, resistance to change, causes of resistance to change, methods to reduce resistance to change

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1. Introduction

G. Hamel (2012: 135) believes that “in our generation the rhythm of change has dramatically increased and the change has been modified.” We can say that every century was marked by various major events but until now there have never been so many fast changes and with significant effects.

The development of an organization involves the constant change and requires an increased capacity to adapt to the environmental conditions of an economic, social and political environment that is more and more dynamic.

In the current context, the change means both threat and opportunity; therefore it is very important how organizational members perceive it.

Change in an organization can target strategy, vision, structure, policies, budget, products-services, suppliers and clients, costs and prices, resources and technologies etc.
All these elements determine competitiveness and organizational performance, being influenced by the external environment and the internal organization.

M. Armstrong (2007) said “change is the only constant process that exists in companies. An efficient company is the one undertaking deliberate steps towards a smooth management of change.”
If the organization does not accept change as an efficient and necessary process, it will no longer be competitive, it will not be able to meet the changing requirements of the market and it will gradually lose customers.

Change is a process that produces a higher or lower degree resistance and was associated with a risk that needs to be assumed by all members of the organization.

J. Kotter (2008: 13) considered that “there is nothing harder to bring to completion, with little chances of success and more dangerous to control, as the initiation of a new order of things.”

The development of an organization involves constant change and requires an increased capacity to adapt to the environmental conditions of a more dynamic economic, social and political environment. Change means different things, depending on the position of the person who defines it. For some people, it may mean keeping or losing their jobs, while for an executive director it may mean increasing profits, reducing costs, and save the business. (M. Jarrett, 2011: 13)

The organization is a living organism that responds to these forces and in a slower or faster process of change.
2. People’s reaction to change

R. Bruksos (2010: 26) considered in one of his papers that “an important part of understanding change is that you should always see the full half of the glass”. This requires courage, discipline and self-knowledge.

Change is a process that produces a grade higher or lower resistance and which is assigned a risk to be assumed by all members.

In the process of organizational change, we believe that special attention must be given to people, to all members of the organization because their reaction towards change is the factor that can make the difference between the failure and the success of change.

According to J. Kotter’s opinion (2008), in the most successful change initiatives, people pass through a series of stages in which they:
1. create a state of necessity;
2. form a strong team to guide the process;
3. create an appropriate vision;
4. communicate that vision to a large number of people;
5. empower its employees to act in the virtue of that vision;
6. obtain sufficient results in the short term to confer credibility to initiatives and weaken criticism;
7. create the necessary momentum and use it to address the main problems raised by the change;
8. incorporate new behavior in the organization’s culture.

The most important question to be answered by any organization concerned with the competitiveness and sustainable development is “do we change ourselves at the same rhythm with the world around us?”

R. Brucksos (2010) presents three ways in which people relate to change:
1. Some of them barely hold. There are always unbalanced, they oppose it, complain and blame others. They are victims of change.
2. Others give life back to normal after a while and go back where they were before the change. They advance slowly but continue to move forward. They are those who remain neutral in front of change.
3. There are also those who use change to enhance the experience. They learn, grow and reach their goals because, for them, the change is an opportunity. They are masters of change.

J. Kotter and D. Cohen (2008) consider that "the main problem encountered in the organizational transformation is changing people’s behaviour."

The persons involved in the process of change can be in one of the following categories:
- **The opponents** to change have an overall negative attitude towards change and negative behaviour towards particular personal change.
- **The promoters** have a generally positive attitude towards change and are also positive towards the particular subject of change based on themselves. They take advantage of change and so they will support it.
- **The hidden opponents** have a generally negative attitude towards change although they seem to support change at a superficial level (“opportunists”). In this case the management of perceptions and beliefs improved with information is necessary to change the attitude.
- **The potential promoters** generically have a positive attitude towards change, at the same time they are not convinced (yet) about the subject of the respective change. Influence management may be appropriate in this case.

In many cases, the companies that have enjoyed positive results in the past continuously try to apply “the previous formula of success”. The situation seems much quieter and is more easily controlled when they preserve the routine, the familiar methods and they maintain the existing status quo.

3. Resistance to change of organizational members

The belief that people dislike change fundamentally, that their first reaction is to oppose and to do everything possible to avoid it is widespread. Most times we face situations in which changes are rejected by people, their implementation leads to conflicts, the results are opposite to those expected and we believe that this can be avoided by organizational diagnosis of the attitude towards change.
The fact that a change is recommended or even mandatory does not mean that employees will accept it. In fact, even the company's key people may (directly or not) resist change. They may simply prefer the existing situation in which they feel more comfortable.

Resistance to change is a natural reaction and is not as unreasonable as many managers consider. Change is felt by employees with their whole being, at brain, emotional and instinctual level. (L. Clarke, 2002: 78)

Many people are reluctant to change consciously, emotionally or instinctively, they are extremely sensitive to the confrontation with the unknown and the threat that they predict may sometimes be real. Resistance to change is a reality in all organizations and groups where there are changes of a smaller or larger size. Resistance to change is perceived by most people as an element meant to cause disruption and additional consumption of organizational resources to implement the change according to the established coordinates.

Resistance to change is present at least at some level both from individuals and from the organization.

**The causes of resistance to change** are numerous, being the subject of research of many scholars in their efforts to find the best solutions to implement the change in the organizational context.

The literature identified three major types of resistance to change according to the causes that generate them:

1. **Cognitive resistance to change** - occurs when change is not well explained, his subjects not understanding the need for change, the purpose or the consequences of change for each of them as individuals or for the professional groups to which they belong.

2. **Emotional resistance to change** - occurs when the participants to change have formed an emotional attachment to certain things that will be affected by the changes that will occur. Another situation in which this type of resistance to change occurs is when participants feel that it is too deep, too radical, too high and the fear of change exceeds a certain level and generates a sense of insecurity within the participants to change.

3. **Personal resistance to change** - occurs in the situations where participants do not trust the agents of change. It is possible that people do not have a problem with the change itself but they have a problem with the person that manages the plan of change. This attitude may be the result of widespread mistrust in the management of that organization; it can be caused by negative experiences with that person or simply for personal reasons. This latter type of resistance to change is the most difficult to overcome and control.

Causes that determine people’s resistance to change (M. Armstrong, 2007)

- the shock of the new (people do not want to lose the safety of something that is familiar, they are suspicious of anything that can change procedures, the existing working methods or conditions of employment);
  - economic fears (loss of fixed salary, job threat);
  - uncertainty (because the effects are not definitely known, the change provides uncertainty)
  - fears at symbolic level (a small change affecting a cherished symbol of someone can be perceived as a much greater change, especially when employees do not know how comprehensive is the agenda for change);
  - threat of interpersonal relations (any intervention in the social area and the impairment of habitual social relationships will implicitly lead to the manifestation of resistance);
  - threat of the status or qualification (moving to a lower level)
  - fears about competence (employees express concerns over the ability to meet new requirements or acquire new skills).

The positive aspects displayed by people in most cases are: excitement, challenge, new skills and knowledge, opportunity, rewarding, motivating, relevant experience. Most often, the negative aspects are apparent and can be easily seen. These may include fear, anger, distrust, confusion, stress, lack of motivation, loss of sense of belonging to the group, inattention, insecurity, conflict, loss of self-esteem.

**Blockages at the individual level** are represented by: personal attitudes, education and living environment, financial reasons, routine, fear of change, the need for security, selective perceptions, distrust in management, altered social life, loss of freedom, diminishing status, low tolerance to change and extra effort.
Resistance to change was eloquently presented by the specialists of the consulting company named PROSCI, who created a model based on the behaviour of the employees affected by organizational changes. (fig.1)

The model comprises three zones (regions), each of which is defining the employees’ behaviour.

In the first zone, characterized by comfort and safety, employees feel safe in their working condition and environment. This is the region of optimal productivity and it corresponds to a normal working behavior.

In the second zone, characterized by concern/uncertainty, the employees are afraid of the changes taking place in the workplace. In this region, the employees’ focus on the activities they have fulfilled decreases, which negatively affects the persons around them. Also, the employees’ morale might decrease and their passive resistance to change is visible, even measurable, by cutting productivity.

In the third zone, characterized by risk, the active resistance to change is visible in the case of some employees; some of them even leave the company. In this context, the impact on customers is significant and measurable and change itself becomes a risk.

Psychologists consider that individual resistance is fed by habits and behaviors of dependence on the values and structures already established, by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, while organizational resistance is based on the inherence of routines (inertia that reinforces their perception of effectiveness), fear of losing power and influence, reduced resources and fixed investment. Moreover, also at the organizational level, we meet hermetic cultural phenomenon that creates barriers that prevent organizations with the outside and absorption of new elements.

Many times, however, resistance to change can represent a factor contributing to the success of change by forcing the change artisans to focus more on the elements involved in organizational change.

4. Managerial solutions to reduce resistance to change

Understanding how to minimize resistance to change can be very beneficial to all the members of the organization.

When faced with resistance to change, managers need to exert their influence on all those involved in order to achieve the implementation of necessary changes. They must know how to convince people that change is necessary and appropriate that that is the right time to implement it and to explain the effects of transformation of the organization.

The activity of a manager means 60% finding the right solutions, while their implementation represents 40%. (Michael Armstrong, 2007, p.104). Managers spend much time persuading others to accept their ideas and suggestions and must frequently argue in favor of what must be done.

The persons who propose changes in the organization must have a clear idea of what they want and believe in order to be able to persuade others to accept the recommendations.
In order to reduce resistance to change, Michael Armstrong (2007), in his paper “How to be a better manager”, proposes ten rules for effective persuasion:

1. **Defining the problem.** Managers must determine whether the problem is a misunderstanding (the failure of mutual correct understanding) or a real disagreement (failure of agreement, even if both sides understand each other). Resolving a real disagreement is not necessarily possible through a better mutual understanding. In general, people think that a disagreement is a battle to determine who is right.

2. **Defining the object and presenting the facts.** It is absolutely necessary to know what needs to be achieved and why. Managers must "assemble" all the facts they need to support his case. The proposal should be judged only on the basis of facts, without any emotional arguments involved.

3. **Knowing the views of the other party.** The key of any belief is to see a proposal from the other person’s point of view, to know what he needs and what he wants.

4. **Insisting on benefits.** The presentation of organizational changes must focus on the benefits that they will produce for reluctant people and diminish their objections or concerns.

5. **Anticipating the other person’s response.** Managers should ask themselves how others might react negatively to the proposed change and to think about ways they might respond.

6. **Determining the next action of the person that resists change.** This is not what managers want to do but what they want others to do.

7. **Convincing people making reference to their own perceptions.** The attitude of people towards change is influenced by personal perceptions, not by managers.

8. **Preparing a simple and attractive proposal.** Managers should be as direct as possible to divide the problem into fragments approachable to be handled at a time.

9. **Involving other persons in their managers’ ideas.** People must be determined to offer their contribution by finding a common ground that allows managers to begin an agreement. Trying to defeat those who are not convinced of the role and importance of change in a dispute will lead them to become refractory.

10. **Concluding the exposure and the opportune operation.** Discussions should not be prolonged too much, managers must choose the right time to complete the proposal.

To reduce resistance to change, managers must pay attention to the way employees understand their new roles and to encourage the expression of opinions of those involved and affected by the change, so that they accept and support change.

Prosci’s five tips for managing resistance to change are:

1. Do change management right the first time - effective change management can eliminate many of causes of resistance before it occurs;

2. Expect it - do not be surprised by resistance, expect it and plan for it;

3. Address it formally - incorporate resistance management planning in all phases of your change management strategy and plan development;

4. Identify the root causes - make sure that you aren't simply responding to the symptom, but really addressing what is causing the resistance;

5. Engage the "right" resistance managers - senior leaders, managers and supervisors are the "right" people in the organization to manage resistance.

Anticipating, identifying and even accepting the reactions of resistance to change, managers can transform this "negative energy" into a "positive" one needed for change.

**4. Coaching for change – a possible solution to reduce resistance to change**

Coaching has been identified as a key tool for executive development and has been cited as a significant way to produce both performance improvement and cultural change.

Organizations that are engaged in a process of change and who want to achieve a real improvement in performance should adopt a management style based on coaching. (Whitmore J., 2011: 42)

Coaching gained interest as an effective action on change and development, whose results depend on coachee’s participation and involvement in the process. (Raţiu L, Băban A., 2012)

For having best result of coaching for change, there should be involved proactive individuals who are open to change and whish to cooperate.

The essence of coaching for change is to highlight and increase awareness and responsibility. Coaching can be an effective way of reducing resistance to change, providing flexibility to increase capacity to adapt to change throughout the organization.
The role of coach in reducing resistance to change process is to create the employees’ feeling of "we want to change" instead of "we have to change".

Bennett L. J. and Wayne Bush M. (2013: 262) consider peer coaching to be appropriate for successfully implementation of organizational change. "Peer coaching can be ideal as a support to change, since the peers are from the same organizational setting or environment and are aware of the contextual challenges and opportunities.

In specialists’ opinion, "the key to high-impact coaching is asking powerful questions about the appropriate roles at the appropriate phases of the change process. (Bennett L. J., Wayne Bush M., 2011: 120). Therefore, it is very important that the coach understands the roles that contribute to the change process.

Conclusions

Change is a continuous process; many changes take place without organizations to interfere. Changes can generate sometimes just a slight adjustment from a functional and structural point of view or, on the contrary, may lead to a major redesign of the organization. Change can bring both improvements and deterioration in the performance of the organization, which is why the adequate moment to initiate change is one of the most important steps in any model of change and one of the biggest responsibilities of managers. For a change to produce positive effects, it should be consistent and lasting, and the biggest challenge when initiating or leading change, both at organizational and individual level is related to changing mentalities and paradigms in thinking. We consider very important in the process of change to review strategies, train and motivate human resources to accept and promote change, communication and expertise in the design, implementation and evaluation of changes.

Every change involves the activation of factors and going through some stages. To adapt to the new situation, the members of an organization need its integration, going over sadness, anger, fear and reaching acceptance. Managers can increase the success rate in an effort of organizational change by understanding the phenomenon of resistance to change, then applying the methods, the techniques and the tools to reduce this phenomenon and to overcome the resistance of employees, both at individual level and the resistance to group or to the organization as a whole. Coaching is a common practice for change and human development but also an organizational development tool.

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